

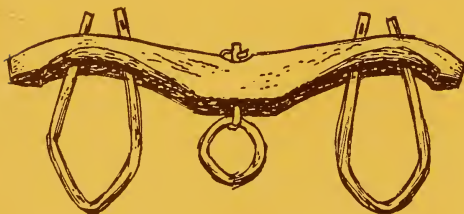
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The People's Lincoln-
A Pulpit-Portrait Based
on Sandburg's Biography

LINCOLN ROOM



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The People's Lincoln —
A Pulpit - Portrait
Based On
Sandburg's Biography



*A sermon given on February 10, 1946,
in Central Congregational Church,
Galesburg, Illinois, by the pastor, Rev.
Alan Jenkins.*

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Lincoln Room

In fire, chaos, shadows,
In hurricanes beyond foretelling of probabilities,
In the shove and whirl of unforeseen combustions
The people, yes, the people,
Move eternally in the elements of surprise,
Changing from hammer to bayonet and back to hammer,
The hallelujah chorus forever shifting its star soloists.

* * * *

The people will live on.
The learning and blundering people will live on.
They will be tricked and sold and again sold
And go back to the nourishing earth for rootholds,
The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,
You can't laugh off their capacity to take it.
The mammoth rests between his cyclonic dramas.

* * * *

In the darkness with a great bundle of grief
the people march.
In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for
keeps, the people march:

"Where to? what next?"

—from "The People, Yes".

[1]

The People's Lincoln

Beyond most of us Abraham Lincoln had his complexities. His complexities bordered on paradox. As one who "could make a cat laugh and also be the solemnest man in ten states", he had in him both a large melancholy and a large mirth. As a lover of both solitude and society, he could, even in the midst of hearty companionship, be suddenly and completely alone. He was both a product of our American dream and a shaper of that dream.

In the 3500 pages of Carl Sandburg's six volumes on Lincoln, our sixteenth president appears in all his many-sidedness. He is often a baffling mixture of moods, mannerisms, meanings. Sometimes, as was remarked of the early Tennyson, the early Lincoln seems to be carrying around with him a large bit of chaos which he is slowly and often with difficulty reducing to order. Even in his later years, Lincoln, like the God of Genesis, seems to be a spirit brooding "over the face of the deep"—only the "deep" this time being within and not without. On the other hand, reading through "The Prairie Years" and on into "The War Years", we are also aware of a man we may call *Lincoln the Unmistakable*. Sandburg himself is of course aware of this Lincoln. Indeed, I believe that part of the genius of Sandburg's work lies in its unfolding revelation of the basic Lincoln.

Here is Sandburg's briefest description of the basic Abraham Lincoln:—"He was of the people, by the people, and for the people". In our discussion this morning, relying throughout upon Sandburg, we shall try somewhat to fill in this twelve-word picture. It will be worth doing. For to see Lincoln more clearly is to see more clearly our democratic dream—our Christian vision given political dimension.

Lincoln was "of the people". In what way? In a multitude of ways!

As every schoolboy knows, Lincoln came of plain frontier stock. His parents called themselves "pore people". They were not "edicated"; that was "sartin". Abraham was born in a cabin with only one door and one window. The floor was of packed-down dirt. As a boy he slept, as did the other members of the family, on a bed of

dry leaves. Lincoln was as definitely out of the American rank and file as Washington was out of the landed aristocracy.

Lincoln was also of the people in his *driftings*. Most of us are nine-tenths the creatures of circumstance. We are far more shaped by events than we are shapers of events. Lincoln was objective enough and honest enough to recognize this fact in his own life. When as a young man he went to New Salem, he was, in his own words spoken thirty years later, "a piece of driftwood floating down the Sangamon". After three years in the Presidency he said "I have been controlled by events". Says Carl Sandburg "He was, in moods, a drifter, letting the wind and weather of history have their way with him, and taking no credit to himself for the inevitable". Of course this drifting-phase of Lincoln, at least in his more mature years, was not a wholly negative fact. Lincoln's drifting could be deliberate, the result of a humble recognition of severely limited knowledge. "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it"—thus philosophized Lincoln as national leader.

Lincoln was also of the people—of *us*—in his *dreamings*. Sandburg speaks of him as "this tall prophet of the American Dream and its hope of the Family of Man around the earth". The Declaration of Independence was for Lincoln a kind of political Bible. Its words "all men are created equal" were sacred words. Lincoln understood them to mean that equality of opportunity is every man's birthright. This for him was what the American Revolution was about; this was what America was about. Speaking in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on the way to his first inauguration, Lincoln stressed the fact that the spiritual mainspring of the Revolution was this hope of universal liberty—this hope that "in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance". This hope, I believe, is an ancient one, deeply embedded in the hearts of men. It is a political variant of the religious vision of universal brotherhood. The fact that Lincoln held it so strongly was part of his tug on the hearts of ordinary people. It was also part of his vote-getting. Many people, voting for Lincoln, were voting the democratic dream.

Then there was Lincoln's *delight in stories*: that proved him "of the people" too. He liked to carry around with him a book

called "Joe Miller's Jests". This book offered over a thousand jokes, some of them pretty "corny". Lincoln apparently loved them all. His best joke book was, of course, in his head. He was perhaps the greatest story-teller and fable-maker our country has known. Sandburg calls him an "Illinois Aesop".

Lincoln was of the people in another respect—in his *direct democratic ways*. People always came first. The rituals of the platform, the formalities of public life, could never shut him off from his friends. Once, when an old farmer friend shouted "Howdy, Abe" as Lincoln was giving a speech from a courthouse platform, Lincoln paused, stooped over, shook hands, and then led his friend up to the platform where he was shortly seated in his blue-jean shirt between two dignitaries wearing "biled" shirts. Needless to say, that was good politics too; Lincoln knew his politics. But first of all he knew and loved people. He was, directly and always, every man's friend.

How was Abraham Lincoln *of the people*? In his descent, we have said, in his driftings, in his dreamings, in his delight in stories, and in his democratic ways. Now let's note a sixth related people's trait—Lincoln's *bigness of heart*.

I believe that there is a kind of instinctive sympathy in men—a kind of native brotherliness. This is, it appears to me, an expression of our God-side—of the divinity resident within us. The Golden Rule—"Do unto others as you would be done by"—is nothing alien; it is a rule of our central being. Now as long as we are just people—and not protectors of property or of power—our usual state is one of kindliness. The heart of our humanity is sound. Lincoln remained, his whole life long, just one of the people. And so, his whole life long, he lived his sympathies. Of course, his sympathies, from the start, seem to have been deeper and wider than is the case with most of us. He had a large fellow-feeling for all living things—for pigs as well as for people. But, observing this, we are simply observing that there was more of Man, true Man, in Lincoln than in most of us.

Lincoln was not only of the people; he was *by* the people. That is to say, he was in part *made by* the people. All of us, of course, are what the school-men call "social constructs". There is no such

thing as a "self-made man". Who among us, for example, invents his speech? Who among us would be anything but a barbarian or worse were it not for our absorption, from birth on, of the culture man has built up over the milleniums? We are "heirs of God"—and of society. But, allowing always for the element of individual genius, Abraham Lincoln was, more than most great men, an expression of what we may call the popular genius. Nourished on the proverbs and platitudes of the people, he always kept looking back to the people, as their President, for his cues and his courage. He kept looking back to them—and to their God. He looked upon himself as their attorney, their agent, their instrument. In him the common people were at work, fashioning an all-time hero. In Abraham Lincoln the God of the common people blended the courage and inventiveness of the frontier, the humor and passion of Kentucky mountain folks, the genial common sense of the prairies, and kindred other elements both crude and refined, into one historic personality.

Yes, Abraham Lincoln was both of the people and, in a large sense, by the people. Finally, he was *for* the people. He was a champion of the masses.

By way of illustration, recall, for example, Lincoln's *hatred of exploitation*. This hatred was not limited to slavery—that was simply exploitation at its vilest. Lincoln despised *any* using of people by entrenched selfish interests. He saw labor as "the common burden of our race", and "the effort of some to shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others" as "the great durable curse of the race". It was, he held, God's intention that we should all be workers. "I hold if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all of the eating and none of the work, he would have made them with mouths only, and no hands; and if he had ever made another class, that he had intended to do all of the work and none of the eating, he would have made them without mouths and all hands." There's a parable for democracy! Incidentally, Lincoln maintained the priority of labor over capital—capital being in fact the fruit of labor.

Being for the common man, Lincoln was naturally, as we have already recalled, an advocate of *equality of opportunity*. This for him meant, first of all, universal education—the free mind. It also

meant the free worker—free to find and to change work—free to strike, among other things. Lincoln was for emancipation all down the line—educational, economic, and political.

Abraham Lincoln is sometimes compared to Jesus of Nazareth. Let's recall now, in closing, how Jesus too was "of the people, by the people, and for the people".

Jesus came of Galilean peasant stock. True, later writers said that he was of "the house of David". But that house, be it remembered, was a mighty large one. For a thousand years it had been expanding. What we know for sure is that Jesus' parents were plain people, his father a village carpenter.

Jesus of Nazareth had many of the traits of the so-called "common people". He liked a good story—put much of his own teaching into story form. He had a very direct democratic way. For example, seeing Zaccheus in a tree, Jesus did not send a disciple over. Instead he spontaneously shouted "Come on down; we're eating lunch together—at your house!" Jesus, too, had the plain man's bigness of heart—a bigness stemming from the heart of God. Property or caste considerations, institutional forms, never dammed the flow of his humanity.

In the second place, Jesus was partially made by the people. How? Because, firstly, he came as an answer to a sustained national spiritual longing. The ancient Hebrews had for centuries been praying for a God-man, a Supreme Counsellor, a Prince of Peace, and their prayer was finally answered. Jesus came "in the fulfillment of time"—and in the fulfillment of prayer. In him the religious idealism of a people was at work, finding God-given culmination in a life. Then, too, Jesus was nourished at the grass-roots, the grass-roots of his Galilee. If our record were more complete, we would find, I am sure, how much ordinary people—shepherds, vinetenders, itinerant merchants, yarn-spinners, religious dreamers, his parents and kinsfolk—helped to shape the prophet they were later, most of them, to repudiate. Above all, we would find how much God worked through everyday folks, as well as through forerunners like Amos and Isaiah, in perfecting his Prince of Peace.

Was Jesus *for* the people? "The common people", we read, "heard him gladly". They heard him gladly because of his message

and his personality, and because they knew he was their friend. He hated their exploitation at the hands of the temple priests. He scorned the little rules of the Pharisees that made crimes out of normal pleasures, and indeed out of normal mercies. He worked for the free mind ("Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free").

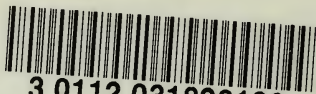
Abraham Lincoln and Jesus of Nazareth. Were they not both "of the people, by the people, and for the people"? As such, they will always be among the true leaders of mankind. And, on that bright day when there is at last a "Parliament of Man" and a "Federation of the World", these two, servants and shapers of the democratic dream, will be remembered among the great deliverers. They will be high up among the final heroes of the people.

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